

Operation Hotel California: The Clandestine War Inside Iraq

Mike Tucker and Charles Faddis. (Guilford, Ct: The Lyons Press, 2009), 216 pp., index.

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“What is the point of even having an intelligence service, since no one is listening to the field intelligence?” This rhetorical question from former CIA officer Charles “Sam” Faddis is one of two themes of *Operation Hotel California*, an account of the CIA–US Special Forces teams in Iraqi Kurdistan in advance of the opening of the Iraq War in 2003. The other theme is that these teams and their Kurdish counterparts amassed an impressive record, something most works on the war have missed. Tucker is author of several books on the conflict, including *Among Warriors in Iraq: True Grit, Special Ops, and Raiding in Mosul and Fallujah* (The Lyons Press, 2005) and *RONIN: A Marine Scout/Sniper Platoon in Iraq* (Stackpole Books, 2008). Faddis was the leader of the CIA team that went into Iraq in the summer of 2002, eight months before the US military entered in force. In addition to providing insight into a little-known aspect of the US involvement in Iraq, the book weighs in on current debates about wartime intelligence. These debates tend to focus on the efficacy of the Intelligence Community, but this book shows that also worthy of consideration is the extent to which the strategists and policymakers are willing to listen.

The text is essentially an edited and annotated oral history that Tucker conducted with Faddis, who provides a litany of alleged US strategic mistakes in the preamble to the war. In Iraqi Kurdistan during 2002–2003, the US Intelligence Community had the advantage of experienced, handpicked teams of CIA and US Special Forces personnel who knew the terrain, culture, language, and people. Yet, when the teams submitted their intelligence, the customers often disregarded it. For example, the CIA teams challenged the notion that certain Iraqi expatriates enjoyed backing inside Iraq and refuted the idea that Turkey would cooperate with US war plans. An example of intelligence not reaching its customers came in March 2003, when CIA found that the US Army Airborne Brigade Combat Team assigned to Iraqi Kurdistan had not seen the information CIA and Special Forces had been collecting for months. Similarly in Mosul, after *Operation Iraqi Freedom* began, the CIA team encountered a US military checkpoint that had apparently not received even the most basic intelligence about the operating environment or posture of the Iraqi army (IA). Faddis is also crudely critical of the Scorpions, the CIA-trained Iraqi-Arab force charged with conducting sabotage inside regime-controlled Iraq. “Basically everything that Tenet says

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Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE JUN 2010		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2010 to 00-00-2010	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Operation Hotel California: The Clandestine War Inside Iraq				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Center for the Study of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, Washington, DC, 20505				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 4	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

about the Scorpions in his book is a crock of [profanity],” Faddis says. “The Scorpions were just a colossal [profanity] waste of time.” (34, 44)¹

The tone echoes that of Gary Berntsen’s *JAWBREAKER* in the assertion that senior commanders prevented field teams from delivering the enemy a decisive blow.² When the CIA teams arrived in Iraq in 2002, they found that Kurdish claims that there were Afghanistan-trained jihadists in the rugged mountains of northeastern Iraq were true and not just an exaggeration. CIA amassed evidence on groups of Islamists that had been gathering in the region since even before 9/11 and that al-Qa’ida fighters fleeing Afghanistan in 2002 were arriving in Iraq. The Islamists who sought refuge there—a harsh mountainous terrain beyond the control of the Iraqi regime or the nearby Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)—were gathering under the banner of Ansar al-Islam, which the United States considered an al-Qa’ida affiliate. By not attacking the Ansar al-Islam positions, the book asserts, the United States allowed the group to grow and its leaders to escape, a hesitance akin to that of Tora Bora in early December 2001. Another lost opportunity, Tucker and Faddis, claim was the US mismanagement of the city of Mosul during OIF, including inadequate consideration of Mosul in war plans and a bungled negotiation to accept the surrender of the IA’s Northern Corps. In both instances, according to Faddis, senior US officials disregarded what the CIA and Special Forces teams were telling them about the realities on the ground.

Faddis was also frustrated by CIA risk-aversion, highlighted best by one tragicomic episode involving a railway demolition. Reminiscent of T. E. Lawrence in the Arab Revolt, a CIA-trained Kurdish sabotage team infiltrated regime territory to destroy a railway and 90-car train that supplied the Iraqi V Corps. But just before the operation, CIA Headquarters ordered Faddis’s team to inform the IA of the coming detonation because “when you blow up the rail line, people on the train might get hurt.” (127). To Faddis this incident underscored the disconnect between the possible incidental damage from one train derailment and the guaranteed (and far more massive) loss of innocent life that would occur in a military invasion of Iraq. Further, it sent a message to the allied Kurds that the United States was willing to compromise their teams—read: torture and death at the hands of the regime—for the sake of avoiding possible collateral damage in one operation.

This book has limitations. The interviews with Faddis reflect one point of view, sometimes leaving the book thin on context. Readers may feel as though Tucker took too much of a back seat. His contributions are brief and rare after the first chapter, and he misses opportunities to put Faddis’s insights into perspective. For example, the reader sees the team’s frustration over not being allowed to assault the Ansar al-Islam camps in mid-2002, but there is little discussion of the equities involved in a US-led war inside Iraq’s borders at that early point. The book also isn’t clear why the absence of a 2002 assault was tantamount to letting the Ansar al-Islam leaders walk. The camps were on the porous Iraq-Iran border, and

¹ See George Tenet, *At the Center of the Storm: My Years at the CIA* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 388–89.

² Gary Berntsen, *JAWBREAKER: The Attack on bin Laden and Al Qaeda: A Personal Account by the CIA’s Key Field Commander* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2005).

the leaders could easily have slipped into Iran. In fact, that is what happened in March 2003, when the CIA-led war against Ansar *did* occur—an episode the book dismisses in one sentence. And contrary to the book's implication, it is difficult to share its certitude that a capitulation of the Iraqi V Corps would have avoided the insurgent course that Mosul and other Sunni areas of Iraq took thereafter. US Iraq policy after the invasion (de-Ba'athification, the disbanding of the IA, candidate list models that favored the Shia, marginalization of the Sunni tribes) had as much to do with the rise of the Sunni insurgency as the conduct of the groundwar itself. Also absent is sophisticated discussion of why the intelligence wasn't reaching the customer, a breakdown that could have transpired at any of several points inside and outside CIA. Another issue that merited more consideration is the US relationship with Turkey. In the book Turkey appears as an incessant spoiler—which it was—of CIA's agenda in northern Iraq, but with little appreciation of the complexities of the US-Turkish or Turkish-Iraqi relationship. This is not to say that the teams' feelings were unjustified, but rather that the reader will not get a fully drawn picture.

A notable gap is the lack of discussion of the CIA team in Qalah Chulan, which by chain of command fell under Faddis's authority at least for part of the time covered in this book. Faddis was the chief of the overall CIA team in Iraqi Kurdistan, split into a branch under himself in Salahaddin, whose Kurdish liaison service was the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the other under his deputy in Qalah Chulan, whose Kurdish liaison service was the PUK. Though it is understandable that Faddis would lend the bulk of his narrative to his own side of the team, the paucity of information on the Qalah Chulan branch and the PUK is conspicuous. Even a few more general statements on the work of the Qalah Chulan team would have balanced the account and clarified the course CIA eventually took in northern Iraq, such as the Qalah Chulan team's involvement in the assault on the Ansar al-Islam camps on the eve of OIF. By sparse discussion of Qalah Chulan and the PUK, *Operation Hotel California* is forced into the awkward position of chiding the US government for lack of action against the Ansar al-Islam camps, even though it did eventually act.

A list of recommendations follows the main text. Some are reasonable subjects for debate. For example, Congress should declare war on al-Qa'ida; the United States should draw down from Iraq in favor of Afghanistan; and CIA should become a less bureaucratic, OSS-like organization. Some will find bizarre the authors' nomination of Richard Marcinko—the former Seal team leader and author of *Rogue Warrior* and numerous novels—to head the organization. Other recommendations just seem out of place: Al Gore should be named the US global-warming czar, the US should recognize Cuba, and compulsory military service for all American males should be adopted.

The book's bibliography is odd. Exactly half the entries are works by Tucker himself, Ernest Hemmingway, or from antiquity. The other half includes studies on Iraq and counterterrorism but it also makes room for fine books such as Henri Charrière's *Papillon*, Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Elie Wiesel's *Night*, and Jack Newfield's biography of Robert Kennedy. Considering the apparently broad intellectual base for Tucker's portion of the book, read-

ers may feel even greater regret that the text is little more than an edited interview with one former CIA officer.

Despite the above faults, *Operation Hotel California* is an important offering to the debates on intelligence. The reader sees the extent to which US strategists and policymakers failed to ask the tough questions about how Iraq would respond to a post-Saddam order. This book also shows that if intelligence is only marginally relevant to strategy in a given country, it may just as easily be the fault of the strategists as that of intelligence. Highlighting that truth, aside from the insights into CIA's prewar work in northern Iraq, makes this book a relevant addition to intelligence discourse.

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